

Testimony on HB 608  
February 19, 2007  
House Appropriations Committee

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,  
Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today.

My name is Mary Gilluly, and I am the Executive Director of The Family Tree Center in Billings. The Family Tree Center provides programs to support and strengthen families in Yellowstone County and the surrounding area and is a community based agency supported, in part, by the Montana Children's Trust Fund.

You have heard this morning from my peers in Bozeman and Missoula about the programs we provide. You have heard success stories about the families Trust Fund programs work with throughout the state. I could tell you dozens more, but instead, I want to talk about the importance of funding child abuse prevention services to families—in terms of both the financial and human costs involved in not doing so. I also want to address how we know prevention works.

The consequences of child abuse and neglect conservatively cost the United States \$120 billion each year, or nearly 330 million dollars each day.<sup>1</sup> These costs include the direct costs—social services, foster care, hospitalization for victims, mental health care, law enforcement and the judicial system—as well as the indirect costs related to the abused and neglected children who require special education services, who enter into our juvenile or adults corrections' systems, and who do not grow up to be productive, contributing members of our society.

These numbers indicate that child abuse and neglect cost every American family over \$1,400 each year. At the same time, we spend \$1.06 per American family to prevent abuse from occurring in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from the economic costs involved, child abuse and neglect takes an unacceptable toll on our children, and since the 1960's, policy makers, legislators, professionals and

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<sup>1</sup> 2001, Prevent Child Abuse America (numbers updated 2005)

<sup>2</sup> 2001, Prevent Child Abuse America

concerned citizens have worked to find effective ways to prevent violence against our children. Child abuse and neglect can lead to a whole host of other social problems for its victims, including substance abuse, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, involvement in the juvenile and adult corrections systems, mental health concerns, chronic physical health ailments, and, unfortunately, even death. The costs of such human suffering are incalculable.

The cost savings, both in financial and human terms, generated through effective prevention programs cannot be overstated. Studies indicate that for every dollar we spend on prevention, we can save as much as ten dollars in later costs associated with abuse and neglect.<sup>3</sup> One study indicates that if we can help just ONE high-risk child avoid the pitfalls often created by abuse and neglect, we might save between \$1.7 and \$2.3 million dollars per year.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more importantly, we can save our children from victimization that can impact them their entire lives.

We have learned, through trial and error, how to prevent child abuse and neglect. We can effectively address risk factors in families, especially when children are very young, to insure that families can successfully stay together and parents can truly nurture their children. And most prevention programs serve hundreds of families each year, at a cost far less than the \$1.7-\$2.3 million we spend to lessen the effects of abuse and neglect for just ONE child.

The Family Tree Center, for example, which utilizes "best practice" research based prevention programs with families, operates on an annual budget of under \$300,000. At mid-year, we had already provided direct services to over 318 unduplicated individuals in Yellowstone, Carbon, Stillwater and Musselshell Counties, representing 142 families, through a variety of program services. In addition, we have provided services to over 100 women incarcerated at the Montana Women's Prison, and over 4,000 children were impacted by training we provided to teachers in Yellowstone, Big Horn, and Rosebud Counties.

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<sup>3</sup> Cost-Benefit of Prevention: Review of the Research Literature, October 2004, Southwest Prevention Center, University of Oklahoma Outreach.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, 1998; The Monetary Value of Saving a high risk youth, Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 14, 5-33

People ask me often, "How can you prove what you prevent?" That is a good and reasonable question. My answer is that I can prove, through program evaluations, through validated instruments that measure risk factors, goal attainment, and parenting attitudes, that at least 70 percent of the families we work with are better able to manage, have fewer risk factors and attain family goals after receiving preventative services. Over 80% demonstrate behaviorally and through self-report, healthier parenting strategies.

I understand that with limited resources, we need to react to situations that already exist. Prevention is a long term solution—not a short-term fix. If we invest resources in it now, though, I can confidently tell you, we can save millions more later. I began my career working with juvenile offenders, and I knew most days when I went to work that we were a band-aid for many "troubled" youth, youth whose problems arose largely as a result of poor parenting. Now, I go to my office, and I look at the infants, the three and four year olds who come to our respite program, and I know they deserve a chance to grow up healthy and strong, free from violence and its consequences.

We know how to provide that chance. Any investment you make in the Montana's Children's Trust Fund Endowment will help us to do it better, to serve more families, and to put in place better evaluation measures to show you we are doing it right.

Thank you.